

The University of Chicago

A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL
INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS
VOCATION

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1938

By
ANTHON STEFFENSEN CANNON

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Our problem has been to develop a socio-psychological interpretation of religious vocation with special reference to contemporary United States of America. We first define the basic terms in our study. Our remaining task is divided into three steps. The first two steps provide the tools necessary to our work in the third.

Our basic interest is in the sense of religious vocation. In order to understand the propulsion of the feeling of religious vocation, however, it is first necessary for us to develop tools which can be utilized in its examination. Therefore, we first study theories of religious vocation and then techniques for producing the experience of religious calling. This supplies the two tools necessary to make an analytical and critical study of the socio-psychological processes going on in the Mormon community which generate the sense of religious vocation.

Our study is in the field of philosophy of religion. Claim is made neither to profundity in historical orientation nor to an empirical study in social psychology. Our task consists in an application of discovered principles, accepted on the authority in the literature, to the subject of religious vocation and its relationships to group life. Our work consists in critical analysis and interpretation of religious vocation with the aid of the principles of social psychology.

A definite urgency characterizes the problem of religious vocation today. A wave of social change has so complicated life in America, that many people find themselves confused and disillusioned. The control of the age-old authorities like the church, the Bible, the family, and the state, over the thinking and conduct of Americans has largely broken down. Does this mean that human nature no longer needs a feeling of religious vocation? The current "stampede to totalitarianism" gives ample answer. But will the type of religious vocation provided by totalitarian movements best meet the needs of contemporary America

with its Christian and democratic backgrounds? Our study gives a negative answer to this question.

Let us first define the terms used in our study. By "socio-psychological interpretation" we mean a critical analysis and explanation with the aid of the principles and insights of social psychology. Social psychology draws upon the subject matter, the techniques and the principles of both sociology and psychology. It deals with the interaction which occurs between the individual human being and his society. It studies the processes by which the social order molds the individual into a component element thereof and the processes by which the individual changes the social pattern. Social psychology is centrally concerned with the problems of social control and of the integration of personality. The functional relationship of religious vocation to both of these problems provides a mutual relevancy between it and social psychology.

In defining "religious vocation" we want to clarify the distinction between the sense of religious vocation, theories of religious vocation, and techniques by which the sense of religious vocation is fostered.

A concrete sense of religious vocation is found in the experience of conversion of the early Christian communities in which the individual sensed the formation of an attitude of devotion to the Christian gospel of love and grace and to Christ its great central figure. The attitude of devotion with its psychological propulsion to a way of life is the sense of religious vocation. The theory of "divine calling" as used by St. Paul signified the "election" of Christians by the grace of God to eternal salvation. The missionary zeal of the early Christians, all the ceremonies and ritual of the Christian cultus, the teaching in Christian homes and schools, and the production of Christian literature--are among the techniques which fostered the growth of the sense of religious vocation.

In the Middle Ages we encounter another illustration of the meaning of religious vocation. The monks, nuns, and clerics felt that the central purpose of their lives was to separate themselves from the world the better to devote themselves to spiritual devotion. The new theory of religious vocation that developed out of this movement made vocatio refer to an outward mode of life applicable to those of ascetic temperament who would leave

worldly interests in answer to the "call." The activities of devoted leaders and groups of monks and nuns, the establishment of monastic communities, and the teaching of this theory of religious vocation by various agencies in the church--are among the techniques by which the sense of religious vocation was promoted.

Let us next examine a non-Christian example of religious vocation. The sense of religious vocation in the lives of loyal communists in Russia today is the zealous devotion felt for the new social order. The theory developed through Marxist socialism holds that the dialectical process in nature calls man to aid in achieving the ideal classless society. Present techniques include the controlled society of the totalitarian state with its use of propaganda, devices to manipulate crowd psychology, and oppressive measures against non-conformists. Earlier techniques included secret meetings, the formation of secret groups, under-cover propaganda, and finally revolution.

To the faithful Jew, obedience to the Law is the psychological equivalent of the conviction felt by the Reformers of the supreme worth of doing the daily task. This is the sense of religious vocation in Judaism. Theory is a formulation of what the duty of the Jew is held to be. Religious education and worship in the synagogue, religious teachings and practices in Jewish homes, and other phases of group life in Judaism--are among the techniques which promote the development of the religious vocational attitude.

The sense of religious vocation is a feeling of obligation or duty to fulfill what is accepted as a central purpose in life. It is an attitude which predisposes one to a way of acting. The individual feels "I am called." "This is my duty in life." He recognizes in the "call" a definition of his social role in life. Implicit in vocation is the feeling that one is called by some higher power to seek some end, achieve some task, or execute some role in the world. Religious vocation is the central dictum of conscience. It is the core of the religious life.

The sense of religious vocation is characterized by the feeling that the ultimate source of the call is beyond the individual emanating from an authority greater than his self. This authority may be conceived to be a God, transcendent or immanent; an orderly universe evolving toward ideal ends; or social groups giving life to the individual. The source of the call is not al-

ways specifically defined. The call may be vague, mystical, and unrelated to any specific source. In each case, however, something beyond the individual which he tends to reverence and by which he feels obligated is the source of the call.

The quality of the sense of religious vocation as experienced by different individuals and cultures ranges along a continuum from no perceptible influence to the complete control of the profoundly religious life. Theories of religious vocation develop later than the earliest feeling of calling and arise to explain that feeling. Many individuals and cultures have no theory of vocation even when the experience of it is not uncommon. Nevertheless, it is important to us in our study of this experience to have a theory about it which has been developed by criticism and examination of outstanding accepted theories. We must also scrutinize the applicability of these theories to the experience of religious vocation. Hence our next step is to survey five current conceptions of religious vocation in American religious thought.

The theory of liberal evangelical Protestantism is that man is to become increasingly Christlike by filling his life with love, willing to serve rather than rule, and surrendering his will in complete devotion to the highest he knows. Contemplation and prayer must give way alternately to work and activity.

Many individuals holding this conception have had a sense of religious vocation which has filled their lives with peace, harmony, confidence, and trust. The value of identification with Jesus for the integration of personality is evident in the way it stabilizes life. The difficulty, however, grows out of the fact that a too calm optimism may result in a paucity of realism which eventuates in ultimate maladjustment. It seems that liberal evangelical Protestantism has arrived at this condition in the contemporary scene. Its voices which continue to iterate its doctrines seem to cry "Peace, peace, when there is no peace."

In trying to be loyal to Christ and to modern science there is a tendency for modern youth to lose the dynamic necessary to be loyal to either. The rise of higher criticism; the rise of the "physical, biological, and social sciences; and contemporary social, economic, and political conditions--combine to condition liberal youth emotionally so that the accepted form of devotion to Jesus Christ in sophisticated circles is no longer very effec-

tive.

In the face of the contemporary confusion the forces of liberalism are dividing and going in two general directions. Part move into the new supernaturalism; while the other division shifts further toward naturalism with its humanistic and theistic branches.

Neo-Thomism speaking for Roman Catholicism provides us with our second theory. Religious vocation is to prepare man for the other world. Man's goal is the attainment of the society of God where man may partake of His glory and beatitude.

This view is backed by an institution with well developed techniques for indoctrination. The unified world view of Catholicism shuts out competing ideas for the great majority of people within the church. Attempts at scholarship are likely to be apologetic rather than objective. "Sound" reason must agree with the teachings of revelation. Social control is heightened by the sanctification of marriage by the church and by the extensive system of Catholic schools. The prestige and authoritativeness of the church, and the provision of activities to fixate the emotions of its people around its ideology exemplify the effective promotion of religious vocation through the process of indoctrination. This is one of the techniques which can be used to evoke religious vocation in man.

The weakness of this theory of religious vocation is that it is likely to become a stumbling block to progress. This occurs in making "sound" reason agree with revelation; and in short-circuiting the activities of this life by the longing for the next world.

In our third theory it is held by the dialectical theology that the central obligation of human life is to live in dependence upon the uncomprehended and super-rational God. Man is to render obedience to a reality that operates beyond the reach of human reason. A continual giving up of his own independent, autonomous existence; a continual standing in responsibility and responsiveness to One Who is absolutely other to himself is man's true life.

The weakness of this theory is that it fails to provide for the testing of truth. In its subjectivism it is thrown back upon religious experience as conditioned by the attitudes and ideas at work in the culture. It falls an easy prey to error as well as truth within its pattern.

Its real contribution is in its embodiment of a great liberating attitude. In its feeling of "dependence upon God" it achieves a psychic liberation from self-interest; individual egoism and autonomy; the cares and worries of the world; and from idolatry to specific laws, principles, and programs. The danger, however, is that fixity in terms of traditional doctrines may set in to mar the basic genius of this attitude.

Religious humanism provides our fourth theory. Religious vocation moves man to function intelligently, energetically, creatively, and imaginatively to achieve a richer life for all men. He is to organize the driving power of his emotions around ideal ends imaginatively conceived to move him in company with his fellows to energetic co-operative efforts to progressively actualize them.

Four contributions of this theory include: the conviction that reflective activity is a factor in shaping human life and action and in changing the world we live in; the insight that thought is motivated by desire; the clear understanding of law as working hypotheses not final, immutable truths; and the help given in discounting a crude supernaturalism.

But can humanism remain religious? Significant criticism indicates that it will fail for lack of motive power once it loses the moral momentum its adherents inherited from Christian theism. The danger is that humanism will not be permanently fruitful as a dynamic theory of religious vocation.

Our fifth and last theory is supplied by Mormonism. Religious vocation motivates man to seek to become perfect in every attribute as his Father in Heaven is perfect. Man's task in the world is to seek truth and to apply it co-operatively with his fellow men to promote the eternal progression of all men by the achievement of abundant health and happiness. This saving process moves man in harmony with his divine destiny and possibilities.

Our criticisms of Catholicism likewise apply to this theory. We return in our final chapter to an extended analysis of the relationship of this conception to the sense of religious vocation.

Our survey of five theories of religious vocation has yielded an understanding of their strong points and weaknesses as guides defining the objectives in promoting the sense of religious vocation. Our next task is to explore the techniques which foster

the growth of religious vocation.

The sense of religious vocation is an important social attitude. Social attitudes are the basic elements of human nature as distinguished from the psycho-physical organism. Social attitudes are socially conditioned. They are the product of the interaction of the individual with his social milieu. This gives us the insight we need in order to understand techniques for producing the sense of religious vocation.

The chief techniques are certain kinds of groups. An analysis of social organization reveals two extreme types of groups within it. Any one group will tend to be nearer one pure type at one time than at others. Groups will characteristically range along a continuum from one theoretically pure type to the other.

Characteristics of the personal group include: a deep sense of community; the type of social organization in which the social nature and ideals of the individual take form; tendency for individuals within it to respond to the total personality of other members in the group; and maximum plasticity. Typical personal groups are most frequently the home, gangs, natural interest groups, sweethearts, and church and school groups.

The impersonal group is the opposite from the personal group. It fails to provide a rich sense of community; influences but little the basic attitudes and ideals of the individual; ignores the individuality of its members; and is generally bound by rigid adherence to fixed regulations. Typical impersonal groups include banks, large universities, judge and criminal, authoritarian homes, and similar social relationships.

Two types of technique for producing the sense of religious vocation resemble the principal aspects of personal and impersonal groups. All techniques to be effective in producing the sense of religious vocation must resemble the personal group in providing a rich sense of community and in shaping the basic attitudes and ideals of the individual. The essential differences relate to their treatment of individuality and to their relative plasticity.

Totalitarian groups use the techniques of indoctrination and regimentation in which they ignore individuality and produce rigidity in social life. A sense of religious vocation is developed which neglects creative potentialities in human nature.

Creative groups are personal groups. Initiates to a creative group sense deep community, partake of the fundamental attitudes of the group, contribute to this sense of community and to the growth of attitudes, and progress in harmony with the plastic development of the group. In personal groups surcharged with this deeply religious attitude is to be found the good life for man and the hope of the world for maximum progress.

We have distinguished two types of techniques for producing the sense of religious vocation. There is a third quality of social organization in which the sense of religious vocation is not produced in any significant manner. The use of all the characteristics of the personal group produces the creative attitude in religious vocation. Using some of the characteristics of the personal group mixed with other characteristics of the impersonal group produces the techniques of indoctrination and regimentation. If social organization is lacking in significant personal characteristics and all areas of life are dominated by essentially impersonal ones the individual will be lacking in a significant sense of religious vocation. This is the condition of many individuals in contemporary America. It is most characteristic of urban communities but is true in lesser degree of some individuals in rural communities.

Having completed our analysis of theories of religious vocation and of techniques for producing the sense of religious vocation we are now ready to analyze the experience of religious vocation itself as we encounter it in a concrete existing group. The Mormon church is selected for this purpose.

In examining Mormon group life we see clearly that all three of the above possibilities of the use of techniques in social organization are at work in the process. The Mormon theory of religious vocation is being used effectively to indoctrinate children in many Mormon homes, and in certain phases of the program of local churches as well as in the program of the Church as a whole.

Young people with a sense of religious vocation thus developed are experiencing conflicts with the teachings of the sciences as they move higher in their educational interests. This results either in strenuous attempts to resist the new teachings in one way or another or in the loss of the earlier sense of religious vocation as a result of intellectual disillusionment. When

this occurs either of two courses may be followed. The student may be cut adrift from any significant sense of religious vocation. He may become cynical, agnostic, and scornful of all religion. The other possibility is that a re-integration of his religious life may take place at a level harmonious with our creative sense of religious vocation.

The training of a professional group of leaders in religious education within the Church is an attempt to meet this need. The growing system of seminaries and institutes of religion established in connection with high schools, colleges, and universities where Mormon students are in attendance places these trained leaders in a position to touch the lives of young people at crucial periods in their development. What happens in the groups formed by these teachers and students will be a function of the theory of religious vocation stressed and the techniques employed.

Lambda Delta Sigma aims to unite Mormon college students in a shared quest for the good life. A rich sense of community, the reconstruction of attitudes and ideals in harmony with expanding intellectual horizons, and the development of a creative sense of religious vocation are the fundamental purposes of the group. To the degree that the group is successful in evoking a deep sense of creative religious vocation the coming generation in Mormonism will be benefitted by having parents, teachers, and leaders who have the background necessary to provide personal groups in which creative religious vocation may be fostered.

The worth of Lambda Delta Sigma will depend upon its avoidance of four dangers: that the activities of the club fail to develop religious attitudes; that the institute become a tool for acute apologetics to reinforce dogmatic loyalties; that students develop new loyalties to fixed and limited patterns; and that intellectuality be greatly stimulated without a balancing growth in religious devotion to the fulness of reality.

Our analysis of Mormon group life shows great diversity in the quality and kind of sense of religious vocation in existence. Many individuals and homes show no significant feeling of calling. Others manifest the stability and integration resulting from complete loyalty to traditional authoritarian faith. Still others with broader intellectual contacts are functioning in richly personal groups where the sense of creative religious vocation is fostered.

The presiding authorities of the Church are trying to keep alive and to promote a rich sense of religious vocation. The techniques they are using are a mixture of those of the totalitarian or authoritarian cultures and those of creative, personal groups. By so doing they are preserving as much of the sense of religious vocation as they know how. By using consciously or unconsciously socio-psychological techniques they are promoting group-consciousness and a rich sense of community. Historic landmarks; leaders, living and dead; stress on the accomplishments of the group; ceremonies and ritual; and a heavy stress on practical, creative activities--are utilized to promote the solidarity of the group and to heighten the sense of religious vocation. A growing tendency ignores the earlier dogmatic theory of religious vocation and lays stress on the creative elements within it when theory comes up for discussion.

Let us summarize the contributions of our study. We first defined our terms and showed their inter-relationships. Second, we critically analyzed theories of religious vocation. Third, we analyzed the techniques operative in social organization by which the sense of religious vocation is generated. And finally, we used these criticized techniques and theories in our analysis of the sense of religious vocation as it operates in Mormonism.

